



Child battles eating issue

Speech key to nutrition

By PETER BARNES

LITTLE Amber McMahon's parents don't mind when she pokes out her tongue, sucks a thumb or blows a raspberry.

In fact, it's encouraged by her speech pathologist, Angie Canning, as a way of making sure the Down syndrome child develops properly.

Helping children with feeding problems is a little known facet of Ms Canning's work, hence the focus of Speech Pathology Week (July 22-28) on the topic Feeding and Swallowing: it's no choking matter.

Amber, who turned one on July 4, has been fed by a naso-gastric tube for most of her life.

"Down's syndrome

children often have low muscle tone and are not very good feeders," said Ms McMahon, of Ashmore, who breast-fed her other children Cormac, now 8, and Erin, 5.

"But Amber also had a hole the size of 10c piece in her heart, and feeding was really hard labour," she said.

Amber had her heart repaired in November, but because she was fed by tube she had not learned to eat normally.

"We assume we know how to eat, but she'd lost the the skill of suckling," said Michelle.

Ms Canning, who works at Disability Services Australia, at Bundall, laid out strategies to help Amber

tackle solid food.

This included pressing the tongue with a spoon and changing the texture, taste and temperature of food.

It also helped if Amber poked out her tongue, sucked her thumb and blew raspberries, all of which used muscles that will one day help her eat properly.

"One day it will click and she'll go on with it," said Ms McMahon.

Feeding problems like those experienced by Amber, stroke victims, premature babies and autistic children were often referred to speech pathologists.

Some 50 per cent of stroke victims and 70 per cent of premature babies

had swallowing disorders, which were treated by speech pathologists.

"It's not just stuttering and things like that," said Ms Canning of her specialty.

"Autistic children may be capable of eating various foods, but some are overwhelmed by tastes or textures," she said.

Babies failed to thrive and develop normally when unable to eat properly, a problem that affected the brain as well as the body, she said.

"But it's about quality of life, as well as nutrition, because eating is also important for socialising," said Ms Canning.



HOPES RAISED... Michelle McMahon with daughter Amber, who has Down syndrome.